INTERVIEW

The Tuba Thieves

Alison O'Daniel in Conversation with Pablo de Ocampo

PABLO DE OCAMPO (PDO): *Alison, you and I have been in conversation about your work for a few years now, and recently we have been connected through the cinema residency I invited you to do at the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. We've taken your film,* The Tuba Thieves*, as a launching point to present programs that think, pretty broadly and differently, about what it means to listen in cinema. And so, for starters, I'm wondering if you could talk about a formative or significant experience you have had with sound in cinema.*

ALISON O'DANIEL (AOD): Two experiences immediately come to mind. One is I remember seeing *Contact* in the theater, and I don't know how old I was…

PDO: *It was released in summer of 1997.*

AOD: So I was 17 then. And I remember sitting in the theater—the opening scene of *Contact* is the POV of something moving away from Earth and we hear a radio signal that's shifting and changing in relation to the distance away from Earth. And at a certain point it cuts and there's a very, very long segment of total silence. And I just had a moment where I realized I've never sat in a movie theater for this long with absolutely no sound playing.

And it really excited me. I thought it was such a beautiful experience. And then another memory is of seeing *Bridget Jones's Diary* and I really hated that movie. But I remember crying during one part and being completely blown away by a recognition of really not liking anything about the movie and yet the soundtrack was making me feel emotions very deeply. It was such cognitive dissonance because I was feeling very critical and yet was still able to be completely manipulated by a soundtrack. Those are two moments in experiencing Hollywood movies where I really understood

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early how the apparatus of cinema, and sound in cinema, can guide the viewer and control our viewing experience and our way of being, through our hearing.

PDO: *Yeah, both very manipulative, but in different ways.*

AOD: Cinema is so manipulative. Even if you're trying to make something where you're attempting authenticity, to sign a contract of sorts to not manipulate the audience, inherently, you will—there's just no way around it.

PDO: *Has the idea of listening, these themes of sound and listening and hearing, always been central to your practice or was that something you developed later in art making?*

AOD: Well, I've been Deaf/Hard of Hearing since birth, we think. My parents figured it out when I was three. I've had hearing aids since I was three. And I've been constantly thinking about and reconciling with certain elements of my Deafness since then. I was raised in a hearing family—the ethos of the 80s and 90s was a sort of that you can do whatever you want, be all you can be, blah, blah, blah. And the way that filtered even into things like audiology—the social realm guiding hearing parents of hard of hearing children was the default thinking to integrate deaf/hard of hearing children into the hearing world. Audiology gives you just the technical tools to hear. So there was no social consideration that you should meet your other half of deaf culture. I say all that because in a lot of ways I was really separate from Deaf culture—I didn't have the psychological and emotional framework to understand it or what I was missing, but I sensed the missing. So, my whole life I had all of these sonic experiences or sound-based experiences that were really intriguing to me, but also these experiences were isolating.

When I went to grad school at UC Irvine and started working with Bruce Yonemoto, he gave me some narrative film assignments, and I recognized I had a predilection for sound design, which was surprising, but reaffirmed a private consideration and awareness I knew I carried with sound. Because of that experience I wanted to meet the Deaf community. Also, at the same time I had gotten my first pair of digital hearing aids. So, there was this whole wild moment where I started hearing things I'd never heard before, and in ways I'd never heard before. Digital hearing aids were just really different from analog ones—they pulled me into a sonic space that felt extremely shifted, which reinforced that I have no idea how people really hear

unmediated. Therefore, I was also reconciling with how I socialize, and feelings of isolation, things that I had never really had language for, suddenly I was starting to comprehend and study. A big encroaching awareness slowly became unavoidable and fascinating at the same time.

PDO: The Tuba Thieves *is a project that's been a long journey for you. It spans across more than a decade of your practice in which these themes and ideas have been really central. I'm wondering, when did sound come into the development of the film? Did you know what it might sound like from the beginning?*

AOD: Yes. Because I think, like around the time, you know, the film started with this news story [of tubas being stolen from high schools in Los Angeles] and I was in the middle of noticing experiences with the car radio in particular…

PDO: *There was a news story about the actual tuba thefts from public school bands in the LA area that was unfolding live via a radio journalist.*

AOD: I was listening to NPR a lot and tuning in to these very Los Angeles stories about access to sound—and these stories were blowing my mind all the time. One of them was this seemingly really boring series of stories about soundproofing in Inglewood—where I live—because of LAX flight paths. These two stories—the tuba thefts and soundproofing under LAX—started to unfold in late 2011, early 2012. And then I would drive through the tunnel that goes to LAX and there's just this beautiful period in that tunnel where you lose any sort of radio signal. So, there's a good section where it's just radio static and I just love it—it's truly one of my very favorite sounds on earth, when a radio loses signal, I think it's so beautiful. So now there were these two themes existing, and you can really see how they wove together for me. Talking about it now, it's so obvious. The theft of the tubas; who's getting overexposed to this noise pollution sound; then losing these radio signals. And my own experience of having access to sound, not having access to sound. In a lot of ways I really feel like the film just built itself.

PDO: *Yeah, all those experiences you're describing are so central to the film. Those sounds were there from the beginning. I'm always aware when we talk of using language that centers the hearing perspective. I'm saying that to acknowledge it in a way. But I'm also really struck how your work helps us to think about how those ideas can be broken down and expanded in different ways.*

You titled your Walker cinema residency, "Are you listening?" And I think it was an intentional provocation in a way. Do you think of listening as something that can happen without sound? And what does that mean for you?

AOD: Yes and no. I mean, there's definitely the sort of spiritual aspect of listening as attunement—listening as a way of being present. But the idea of hearing is embedded in that, the idea of sound is embedded in those things. So, I was reading this interesting Reddit post where someone made a comment about the film *The Lighthouse*—and I haven't seen *The Lighthouse*, but I guess there's a scene where Willem Dafoe is farting—and in the film's captions it says that. And someone made the comment, "imagine being deaf and just learning that farting makes sound!" Deaf people *know* that farting has sound—to be deaf is to live in a hearing world and to constantly know that everything is sound-based. Deaf people know, sometimes more than hearing people, what does and doesn't have sound! Whereas hearing people aren't really thinking about that so much. I feel like I'm constantly in these realms where there's this simplification, or a kind of awe about ideas of deafness, and many misconceptions. I think it's fascinating how blown hearing people's minds are by deafness. I think because language is not shared, there's this gulf of separation. I really identify as being in the middle—like hearing people wouldn't necessarily know I'm d/Deaf—whereas Deaf people definitely know that I'm in the middle because I'm not fluent in sign language. And it's so meaningful to me when other Deaf people call me Deaf, don't call me hard of hearing—it's fascinating how endlessly big these notions around sound and listening are—I don't get used to them.

PDO: *Yeah, when you have access to that sense you don't actually pay attention to some of it. So, "imagine you're a deaf person understanding that farting has sound…" like of course, everything has sound! And that's even so much of John Cage's* 4'33", *which you reference in* The Tuba Thieves, *and also that famous Cage account of being in the anechoic chamber: even in the space of absolutely no sound, there is a sound that you are hearing—there's never* not *sound. When someone is fully in the hearing world and hearing everything, you're just having to filter out half of it, so you would never think of that.*

AOD: Yes, literally your brain is filtering it out because you would go crazy. And I don't mean to contribute to any sort of shame for hearing people, because I've also done that—like when I got that first pair of digital hearing aids, I had one of those like *4′33″* or anechoic chamber moments because I

peeled a banana and I remember just being like, oh my fucking god. It's got a sound. And I've written about that moment—I was just like, "of course, yeah, of course farting makes sound." But more interesting is to then think about when deaf people go into a public bathroom with hearing people, to know that you maybe don't have access to the sound that your body is making and other people do. That's where I think these kinds of social power dynamics become very intimate on a level that is much less hilarious or titillating. There are these questions of boundary-crossing that are really complicated.

PDO: *This is maybe an aside, but I'm just curious, when did you first encounter* 4'33", *and is there a hot take on* 4'33" *in the deaf community? Like, is* 4'33" *John Cage hearing-splaining deafness?*

AOD: I will say that one of the few reviews the film got by a Deaf person was by the author Delbert Wetter. He wrote in *The Hollywood Reporter* about how much he loved watching a Deaf person sort of take the piss out of *4′33″*—to have this man get up and walk out, to reject the show. Now, to back up—I had such a process-oriented way of building this film: I wanted to start out with the soundtracks, so I invited three people to make the soundtracks first. I gave them a bunch of visual references, and one of the references was from a book of hippie architecture. There was one picture of a concert hall in Woodstock, the Maverick Concert Hall, and I didn't know anything about it. But I sent this photo to Steve Roden, who was a painter, a musician and one of the three composers I was working with. For me it was just a photo of a concert hall, I could have sent him any of the photos in the book. But Steve wrote back and asked, "you know that's where John Cage premiered *4′33″* right?" I didn't, and I was embarrassed, and he thought it was amazing that I just randomly sent that to him. Because he had also been doing a daily meditation performance of *4′33″*. Every day. And he said, "the synchronicities here are incredible—you've got to do something with *4′33″*. I immediately bristled—I remember thinking, "oh no, that's so cheesy." I went and visited the Maverick Concert Hall. It's an absolutely beautiful space and I realized, that one of the things with *4′33″* that never gets talked about is that it originally was (maybe) unintentionally a piece about nature, because it's like a barn. You can hear the trees, you can hear the wind, you can hear everything around. I was struck by the intensity of the mythology of *4′33″*, it's always a conversation that skirts around ideas of silence. Deafness is also misunderstood or mythologized as being about silence or being an experience of silence, and then I could see this rich connection between

4′33″ and deafness. Part of what John Cage was investigating, that I think is so beautiful and powerful, is this allowance of everything to come in, into wherever it's performed, whether it's the sound of the audience, the trees, whatever. So, I gave myself permission to write this very simple character called The Irritated Man who gets up and leaves during a performance, and he goes out to have his own experience in the forest, one that's at first irritated but then gradually something stops him. So, when you can step back from the mythologizing or idolatry and just sit with the ideas—I love John Cage, and it's to the misunderstandings, or the quickness to make associations that I was saying, "I'm not here for that."

PDO: *Outside of moving image work you also have a studio practice that involves making objects and other gallery-based visual work. I'm wondering if you could talk about how these ideas show up in that practice.*

AOD: Through development of *The Tuba Thieves*, I was getting invitations from galleries and museums to show some of the scenes as I was slowly making the film. So, between 2013 and 2018 I made ten short films that were just scenes from *The Tuba Thieves*. And all the spaces in galleries and museums have bad acoustics, you know, they're not theaters, they're not necessarily made for video. So, the first time I had an exhibition, I went in and I thought, sonically this is going to be a nightmare, this isn't going to work. And then I realized I could work with that, and it was actually really fun. I had a show at the Bemis Center, and I remember sitting in the space and this huge HVAC system turned on, and I realized the center walls of the gallery were built around an HVAC. How were you supposed to ignore this? So, I actually miked up this center wall area, to make that sound a grounding part of the show. The show was called *Heavy Air*, which is also a caption in *The Tuba Thieves*. So, working with sculpture and objects really has become a way to amplify aspects of ambience and acoustics—to find practical solutions to bad sound which excited me. When I'm working with objects, I might be using sound-dampening materials that are making fractions of a difference in terms of the sound, or not at all; or to point a microphone at an air vent—the objects give me a way to make people pay attention, in a way that captioning does in *The Tuba Thieves*. It's forcing you to deal with things that maybe you wouldn't usually acknowledge. For instance, there's a caption in *The Tuba Thieves* of "air circulating." I really didn't have to caption that. I think it's interesting to hear those things hearing people can ignore and sit with them intentionally.

PDO: The Tuba Thieves *has been a revelation to me, and to many people who have seen it, just about how cinema might show up differently for both deaf and hearing audiences and people across the spectrum of hearing. If we want to get out of the binary ways of thinking about hearing and ability, I'm wondering if making* The Tuba Thieves *cracked something open or pointed you to new possibilities, and where you may go from here?*

AOD: Yes. But unfortunately, I was very surprised and yet not surprised as I was doing the film festival circuit, at the casual relentlessness of ableism—like that stupid Reddit thing, it blows my mind. So in some ways I feel like I'm taking this turn from a very joyful project to looking at a much darker side—I've been thinking a lot about the weaponization of sound in relation to ableism. The smaller stuff that is just so ubiquitous. I do also anticipate a lot of playfulness and joy though as well. I'm doing a project right now at UCLA with the Social Software and the Heumann Community Partnership Lab. We're trying to solve this really simple but real problem: as more d/Deaf people make films, whom obviously we are going to be thinking visually about and therefore making visual captions, when we get into the distribution part of a film, it's hard to translate those into other languages. We have SRT files that get translated for static lower third captions and subtitles, but what happens if a caption is fading on or off or has a little bit of animation? So, I want to solve this for filmmakers because it's a seemingly minor, but actually really unfair disability tax that adds extra labor. It's a technical issue that filmmakers are going to confront globally. I think there's an activism in me that I'm thinking through via the real issues in creative projects. I feel like I've stepped into this on-the-ground, in-the-world space of looking at where these bits of ableism live and thrive, and I want to halt it so that we can see, think, make, and listen clearly.

Pablo de Ocampo is Director and Curator of Moving Image at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota. From 2014 to 2020, de Ocampo was Exhibitions Curator at the artist-run center Western Front in Vancouver, Canada. His previous positions include Artistic Director of Toronto's Images Festival from 2006 to 2014, co-founder/collective member of Cinema Project in Portland, Oregon, and in 2013 programmer of the 59th Robert Flaherty Film Seminar *History is What's Happening*, and is currently the President of the Board of Trustees for the Flaherty Seminar. His writing has appeared in Canadian Art, C Magazine, BlackFlash, and in the catalogues Wendelien van Oldenborgh: *unset on-set* (Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo), *Dissident Lines: Lis Rhodes* (Nottingham Contemporary), and *Low Relief: Lucy Raven* (EMPAC, Mousse, and Portikus).

Alison O'Daniel is a d/Deaf visual artist and filmmaker and builds a visual, aural, and haptic vocabulary in her work that reveals (or proposes) a politics of sound that exceeds the ear. O'Daniel is the director of *The Tuba Thieves*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival 2023. She is a United States Artist Disability Futures Fellow and a Guggenheim Fellow. O'Daniel has also received grants from Ford Foundation; Sundance; Creative Capital; Field of Vision; ITVS; Chicken & Egg; SFFILM. She is represented by Commonwealth and Council Gallery in Los Angeles and is the Suraj Israni Endowed Associate Professor of Cinematic Arts in the Visual Arts department at University of California, San Diego.